

OPENING STATEMENT
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SENATOR, OKLAHOMA

Chairman McCain, Vice-Chairman Dorgan, I thank you for holding this important hearing this morning.

Given our most recent oversight hearing on Indian gaming, today's hearing comes at particularly welcome time. In my opinion, the undue influence that gambling interests have in Indian Country is a direct threat to the long term success of American Indians, and frequently, to the communities where gambling facilities are built. With this hearing, and our efforts on land-into-trust oversight in the months ahead, it is my hope that we will begin to get a clearer glimpse of the powerful, and all too often negative, impact that gambling is having on tribes and our communities.

No where is this more apparent than in the State of Connecticut. I look forward this morning to examining the testimony of my colleagues, Senator Lieberman and Senator Dodd, and the rest of the Connecticut delegation. Their experience and expertise on this issue is one that we all have to gain from, and hopefully, will allow this committee to build a consensus on the need for an immediate overhaul of the federal recognition process.

In addition to my concerns about the undue influence of gambling interests, I have serious misgivings about the ability of the Office of Federal Acknowledgement (OFA) to carry out the important mission of federal recognition. While resource concerns can and will be examined by this committee, more fundamentally, I firmly believe that the OFA and the Department of Interior have proven themselves incapable of handling these duties in a timely or fair manner. This is partly the fault of the agency itself, but in my opinion, is reflective of a much larger failure on the part of Congress to enact guidelines that clearly outline the mission of the OFA, or to conduct serious oversight of this important process.

Based on the caliber of the witnesses before us this morning, and the commitment of Chairman McCain, I am confident that today we will begin to get a much better look at the problems facing OFA, tribal governments, and state and local officials. The stakes are high—official federal recognition brings with it important responsibilities on the part of the federal government and prospective tribal governments.

I applaud the Chairman and Vice Chairman for conducting this hearing. I am committed to working with you to enact serious, long term reforms for the OFA and the Department of Interior. The process of tribal recognition, and the far reaching consequences of these important decisions, is far too important to allow further delay.